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SUBJECT: CHURCH DEBATE ON ROLE IN CONFRONTING SECURITY
ISSUES DEMONSTRATES GROWING CONFIDENCE AMONG MEXICAN
PRELATES

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¶1. (SBU) Summary. Comments by Durango Archbishop Hector Gonzalez Martinez April 17 about the whereabouts of fugitive drug kingpin Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman prompted a lively debate last week at the Mexican Bishops' Council about the role of the Catholic Church in Mexico,s ongoing drug war. While many questioned the appropriateness of the archbishop's claim, there was general agreement with the notion that Mexico,s Catholic Church has a role to play in applying its moral suasion to the broader issue of crime and violence here. End Summary.

¶2. (U) The 87th Plenary Assembly of the Mexican Bishops' Council last week was infused unexpectedly by discussions of how to confront increasing drug violence in Mexico and the whereabouts of one of its largest kingpins. Days earlier, Durango Archbishop Hector Gonzalez Martinez had speculated that Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman is currently living near the Durango town of Guanecevi, adding that "only the authorities don't seem to know it" (implying that at least some might be looking the other way). The comments touched off a heated reaction. Town officials in Guanecevi denied they were providing a haven for the drug lord and challenged authorities to prove he lived nearby. A senior commissioner in the Public Security Secretariat said that the prelate should explain where he got his information and present evidence to the authorities. A poll indicated that most Mexicans agreed.

¶3. (U) Meanwhile, two military intelligence officers were found dead April 21 in the Durangotownship of Tepehuanes, about 30 miles south of Guanacevi, with a note reading, "Neither officials nor priests will ever be able to catch El Chapo". The following day the army said it stepped up patrols in the remote mountainous drug hotspot.

¶4. (U) Archbishop Gonzalez drew a reaction from his fellow prelates as well. Bishop Faustino Almendariz opened the annual Bishops Conference noting that priests should exercise "prudence when voicing opinions, especially if they can't back them up." However, Gonzalez,s comments also prompted a broader, and often frank, dialogue. Conference President, Bishop Carlos Aguiar of Texcoco, acknowledged that many churches, particularly in Mexico,s poor regions, receive large donations from drug traffickers. A chorus of Bishops (including Cardinal Norberto Rivera) sought to clarify his assertion or distance themselves from it in subsequent days. A Conference spokesman said that priests in eight states have been threatened with harm or death, presumably by organized crime, often in retaliation for their anti-drug campaigns.

¶5. (U) While some, such as Campeche Bishop Ramon Castro, said the work of priests is not to investigate organized

crime, others insisted that the Church should take a more active role in addressing the problem. One keynote speaker, an Italian priest, who leads a group of civil associations against the Italian mafia, defended Archbishop Gonzalez and said church officials hold a responsibility to publicly challenge organized crime. Saltillo Bishop Raul Vera called for the prosecution of corrupt governors and mayors, adding that drug cartels should be declared terrorist organizations and have their assets seized. Cardinal Rivera said that Mexico needed to restore confidence in the country's ability to confront challenges like narco-trafficking and the economic crisis.

¶6. (U) Even Senior Mexican authorities and politicians weighed in. Addressing the assembled Bishops, Secretary of Interior Gomez Mont told the bishops that it was necessary to strengthen the country's institutions, including the Catholic Church, to fight organized crime in a more coordinated fashion. Leaders of the three main parties agreed that the state should guarantee the security of those who make declarations against organized crime, including churchmen.

¶7. (SBU) Comment. In recent years, Mexico's Church and state have both liberally interpreted constitutional restrictions on the former's ability to weigh in on social and political issues. The Church spoke out in support of open electoral democracy in the mid-1980s and against the corrosive influence of corruption during the Fox years. Most recently, it had endeared itself to the Calderon administration on the issue of law and order by lambasting U.S. corruption as significantly responsible for Mexico's epidemic crime and violence and by suggesting the opposition PRI was deliberately stalling security reforms. Still, last week's internal debate, and the response it elicited from members of the government and body politic, suggest that

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Mexico's Bishops are more willing and able than ever to lend their (not always unified) voices to the major issues of the day. End Comment.

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